The UNEP decision is a significant step, according to chemist Bill Moomaw, a professor of international environmental policy at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. "There is no treaty right now that controls the handling of POPs or other toxic organic chemicals except as wastes. No international laws restrict the production, sale, or exportation of these chemicals," Moomaw says.

A POPs treaty will be of major import, agrees Jerry Poje, NIEHS director of international programs, as it will "represent our chemical safety legacy to the world's children." Regulating these substances on a global basis is crucial, he adds, because the chemicals do not respect boundaries between countries. "It doesn't do much good for one nation to ban a substance, as the U.S. did with DDT in 1972, when it's widely used elsewhere in the world. That's especially true given how readily these substances travel through the air and water," Poje says.

While applauding the resolution for action on POPs, Poje stresses that the agreement basically just says that this process should begin, without specifying exactly what outcome is expected. Thorny issues need to be addressed, particularly with regard to pesticides such as DDT that are still used for disease control. "If we don't deal with public health issues in a thoughtful way, we might actually do more harm than good," he says. A May 1997 meeting of the World Health Assembly also endorsed a rapid phaseout of POPs.

Polly Hoppin, a public health specialist with the World Wildlife Fund, views the impending ban on DDT as an opportunity to promote integrated vector control strategies along with the restrained use of pesticides. "There are cost-effective alternatives to DDT, but shifts are needed both in research funding and in the infrastructure for implementing disease-control programs," Hoppin says. She believes a ban can ultimately lead to alternative solutions that meet both public health and environmental health objectives.

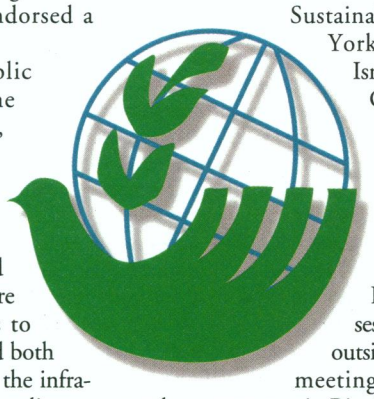
With some 20,000 chemicals in use today, criteria have to be developed for determining which of these substances go on the POPs hit list. The process established to deal with the initial dirty dozen can set an important precedent for regulating other persistent pollutants. Moomaw, who is also a member of the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, maintains that a comparable scientific body is needed to provide technical advice. "By bringing together scientists from a broad range of countries, you can pretty much cancel out national interests and also assure that the research done in all the countries of the world gets considered," he says.

Lawrence Susskind, an environmental policy expert at MIT and Harvard Law School who is training participants in the upcoming POPs negotiations, believes the time before these deliberations can be wisely spent assessing the scientific work that has been done on POPs and integrating that knowledge into the process. He also recommends that informal brainstorming sessions be held in advance of the proceedings, before people have taken set positions.

"Most treaties that have been adopted to date have been rather minimal, doing little more than acknowledging that there is a problem," Susskind says. He is more optimistic in the case of POPs regulation for two reasons. First, many POPs substitutes are already available. Second, there are powerful economic incentives to produce other substitutes because the market for those products will be huge. Susskind says, "There are economic benefits to be had here, as well as environmental and health benefits, that . . . make us more hopeful this time around."

Earth Summit, Take Two

In opening the United Nations Special Session to Review Global Efforts for Sustainable Development in New York City on June 23, Razali Ismail, president of the U.N. General Assembly, commented that the five-day conference would be a time for "critical reflection and concrete action" on the environmental problems threatening the earth. However, by the close of the session, most participants and outside observers agreed that the meeting, like its predecessor five years ago in Rio de Janeiro, had accomplished far less than would be necessary to preserve a healthy global environment. Though the heads of state who attended bemoaned the lack of progress made toward sustainable development, few would commit their nations to any new measures to protect the earth.



"It was a meeting of hot air, of pompous speeches," said Karan Capoor, a policy advisor with the Environmental Defense Fund, of the special session. "It all sounded very nice . . . but when you really look at it, there really wasn't anything concrete that was done there."

In 1992, representatives of 178 governments met at the unprecedented United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Rio Earth Summit, and agreed on a program of action called Agenda 21—a blueprint for how humankind must operate in order to avoid environmental devastation. The special session in New York gave many of these same representatives and others an opportunity to assess the progress that had been made in implementing the covenants of the Rio agreement and to reaffirm a global commitment to heal the ailing environment.

"Five years on from Rio, we face a major recession; not economic, but a recession of spirit," Ismail told the assembly, "a recession of the very political will that is essential for catalyzing real change. The visionary ambition of Agenda 21 is tempered by somewhat damning statistics that show that we are heading further away from, and not towards, sustainable development."

Over the five days of the special session, 199 speakers addressed the assembly, enumerating the accomplishments that had been made toward implementing Agenda 21 and pointing out the many areas where the worldwide effort has fallen short. Many representatives lamented the fact that the developed countries have not supplied the economic help to developing countries that was pledged in Agenda 21. "On the world level, aid for development was being reduced. Few of the [developed] countries are complying with the target of 0.7 percent of their [gross national product] for this purpose," Arnoldo Aleman Lacayo, the president of Nicaragua, told the assembly. "The developed countries are not fulfilling their Rio commitments; new resources are not forthcoming, technology transfer is minimal, and the burdens of external debts constrain the ability of the developing world to invest in sustainable development."

Other speakers pointed out that five years after the Earth Summit in Rio, one-third of the earth's population still does not have access to safe drinking water, that controls on transboundary movements of hazardous and radioactive wastes called for in Agenda 21 have been ineffective, and that deforestation continues while the atmospheric buildup of greenhouse gases is not being effectively controlled.

The participants at the special session, however, were able to announce that some goals of Agenda 21, particularly in the areas of consensus building and infrastructure development, had been met. Multinational conventions on climate change, biodiversity, and desertification have been signed since the Rio conference, and agreements have been reached on protecting fish stocks and the marine environment. However, no new treaties or commitments were produced as a result of the events in New York.

In his speech to the assembly, President Clinton emphasized the steps the United States has taken toward sustainable development. "We've passed new laws to better protect our water, created new national parks and monuments, and worked to harmonize our efforts for environmental protection, economic growth, and social improvement," the president said.

On climate change, Clinton admitted that the record of the United States, the world's biggest producer of carbon emissions, was not adequate. "We have been blessed by high rates of growth and millions of new jobs over the last few years, but that has led to an increase in greenhouse-gas emissions in spite of the adoption of new conservation practices," said the president, who had recently announced the strengthening of the Clean Air Act. "But we must do better, and we will." With a major international conference on climate change scheduled for later this year in Kyoto, Japan, many anticipated President Clinton's speech as a preview of the position the United States would assume at that meeting. Though Clinton did not commit the United States to any specific reduction levels or dates in his speech, Capoor said that the president's comments were the most positive thing to come out of the special session. "Basically," said Capoor, "he said that something . . . would be done. He reaffirmed that he would commit to a legally binding treaty."

While the speakers addressed the U.N. General Assembly, other representatives worked to finish the final outcome of the special session, a 46-page technical program containing suggestions on how to better implement the recommendations of the Rio conference. Disagreements over the wording in portions of this document caused participants to work past the 8:00 P.M. Friday deadline and into the early hours of Saturday, in many cases, critics charge, substituting vague phrases for more concrete goals mentioned in the original draft. "All the changes were basically to remove any mention of specific levels or specific reductions," Capoor said. "I don't think there's anything significant at all in there now."

Sticking points included the wording in the portions of the document that refer to poverty and women, to the World Trade Organization, to population and reproductive health, to land degradation, and to financial instruments. The conference was expected to produce a second document as well—an eight-page political declaration that was to sum up the technical program—but disagreement among the representatives caused this document to be scrapped entirely.

In the remaining document and in their speeches to the assembly, the world's leaders only managed to agree that a serious worldwide commitment to the ideals of Agenda 21 is needed but that no progress would be made on such a commitment until a later date.